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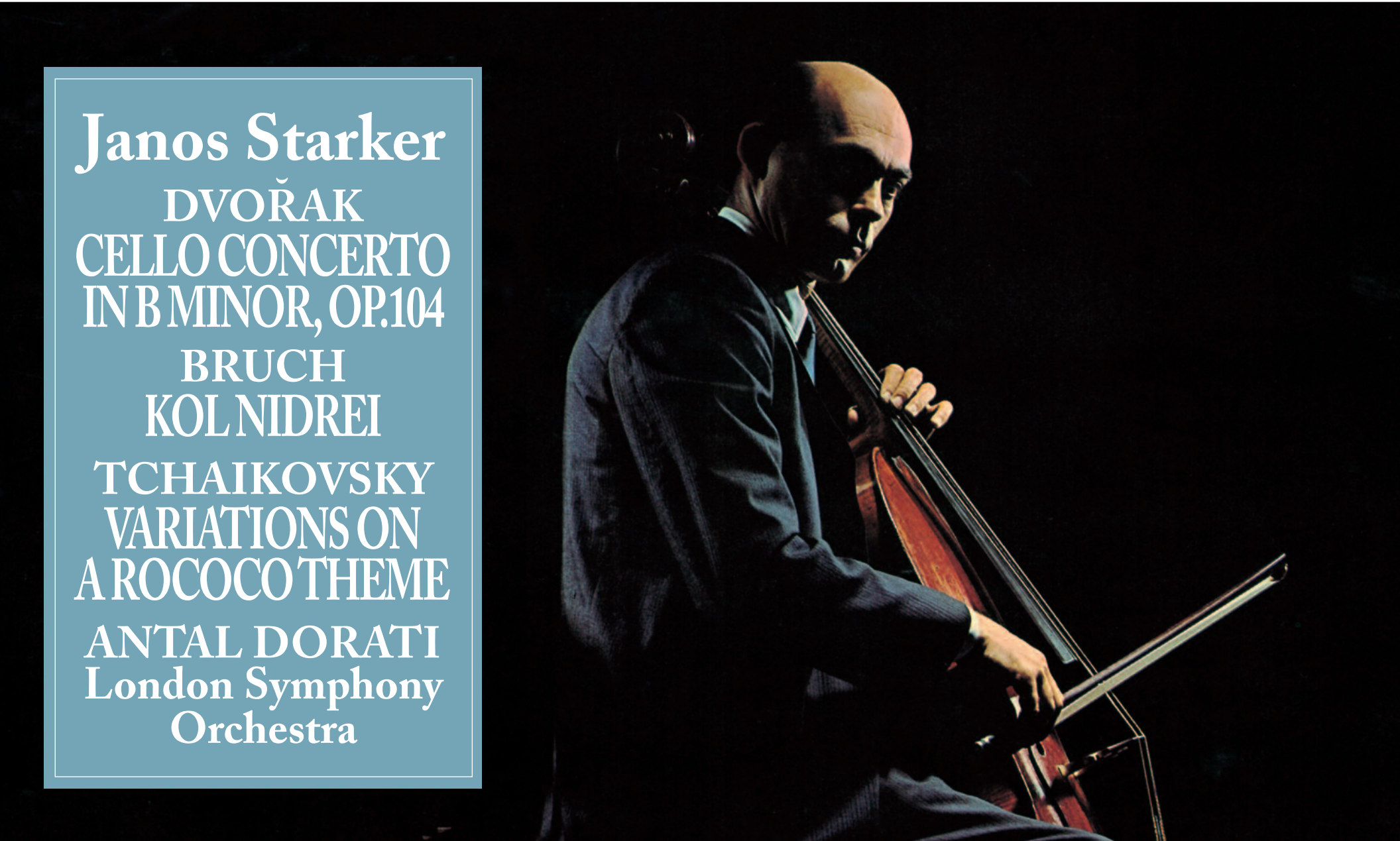
Janos Starker

DVOŘAK
CELLO CONCERTO
IN B MINOR, OP.104

BRUCH
KOL NIDREI

TCHAIKOVSKY
VARIATIONS ON
A ROCOCO THEME

ANTAL DORATI
London Symphony
Orchestra



Janos Starker (Photo: Mike Evans)

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ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)
Concerto in B minor, op.104
for violoncello and orchestra

1	1 Allegro	15.08
2	2 Adagio ma non troppo	11.11
3	3 Finale. Allegro moderato	11.47

MAX BRUCH (1838–1920)

4	**Kol Nidrei, op.47**	9.56

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)

5	**Variations on a Rococo Theme, op.33**	15.46

JANOS STARKER violoncello
LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Conducted by **ANTAL DORATI**

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DSD
Direct Stream Digital

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DVOŘÁK: CELLO CONCERTO

"Why on earth didn't I know that a person could write a violoncello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago." These words were spoken after a first examination of the new Cello Concerto by Antonín Dvořák. The speaker was no less than Johannes Brahms, Dvořák's long-time friend and champion, who seemed to have forgotten for the moment that he himself had only recently completed the magnificent Double Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra.

Brahms was not the only composer who realized the many problems involved in writing a work for cello and orchestra. Although the cello has an exceptionally wide range, its more accessible notes lie well below the normal melodic surface of the orchestra, making it difficult to penetrate a heavy fabric of orchestral accompaniment. Besides, while a good player can perform great feats of virtuosity on the instrument, it still lacks the exciting tonal brilliance of the violin. Perhaps that is why so few really fine compositions for cello exist in the concerto literature. Of these, performers and listeners alike are in general agreement that the Dvořák Concerto belongs in the very front rank — many say at the top of the list.

It was another cello concerto — the second by Victor Herbert — that inspired Dvořák to write his sole work in this form. In March 1894, during his last year as head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, the Czech composer heard Herbert play his new concerto for the first time with the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall. He was so moved by the experience that he determined to write a cello concerto of his own. His friend and compatriot Hans Wihan, Professor of Cello at the Prague Conservatory, had long been pressing him for such a work; and now he saw his way clear to creating it.

Dvořák began work on the concerto in New York in November 1894 and completed it the following February. During that period, he had the assistance of Alwin Schroeder, first cellist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who offered advice on certain technical details.

Wihan, too, had some advice of his own to give. When Dvořák returned to Prague in April 1895, the Czech cellist took great pains to edit the solo part, adding bowings and fingerings. Evidently he wanted to go even further and add some of his own inventions, including a cadenza in the last movement. For his collaboration on the work, Dvořák dedicated the concerto to Wihan. But he feared that Wihan might try to interfere in the correction of the proofs. Therefore, on October 3, 1895, he felt impelled to write his publisher, Simrock: "My friend Wihan and I have differed as to certain things. Many of the passages do not please me, and I must insist that my work be printed as I have written it. In certain places the passages may, indeed, be printed in two versions — a comparatively easy and a more difficult one. Above all, I give you my work only if you will promise me that no one — not even my friend Wihan — shall make any alterations in it without my knowledge and permission — also no cadenza such as Wihan has made in the last movement — and that its form shall be as I have felt it and thought it out. The cadenza in the last movement is not to exist either in the orchestral or the piano score; I informed Wihan, when he showed it to me, that it is impossible to insert one. The finale closes gradually, *diminuendo* — like a breath — with reminiscences of the first and second movements; the solo dies away to a *pianissimo*, then there is a *crescendo*, and the last measures are taken up by the orchestra, ending stormily. That was my idea, and from it I cannot recede."

It may have been the difference between Dvořák and Wihan which account for the fact that the latter was not the soloist at the concerto's premiere. This took place at a concert of the London Philharmonic Orchestra on March 19, 1896. The composer conducted, and the soloist was the young English cellist Leo Stern, who came to Prague especially to study the work with Dvořák, and who returned there to play the concerto on April 9. Later, Stern introduced it to New York and Chicago. The first American performance, however, was given, appropriately, by Schroeder with the Boston Symphony on December 19, 1896.

Though the concerto was written in New York, there is nothing which relates it musically to Dvořák's other American compositions. By the time he came to work on it, he was far too homesick to put anything of the New World into it. His thoughts were with his native land, and the spirit of the music is entirely Czech.

The concerto is scored for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, kettledrums, triangle and

strings. It is in the customary three movements. The first movement is an even-flowing *Allegro*, with a sturdy first subject and a rich, melodic second theme, first announced by the solo horn. There is a feeling of quiet reserve about the second movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, which includes a brief cadenza for the solo instrument. The finale, *Allegro moderato*, is almost march-like in character. Its rather unusual ending has already been described in the composer's own words. But another unusual feature, which occurs shortly before the end, is a duet for the solo cellist and the orchestra's concertmaster.

BRUCH: KOL NIDREI

It is a sort of musical compliment to Max Bruch's long devotion to folk music that what is considered one of his most representative works should have sprung from an alien tradition. Along with his First Violin Concerto, "Kol Nidrei," an "Adagio for violoncello based on a Hebrew melody," is today the most frequently heard composition by a composer who was a contemporary of Brahms, but who survived him by almost a quarter of a century. The traditional Hebrew chant has been treated with such conviction, however, by this Lutheran grandson of an eminent German clergyman, that it is more familiar to concert-goers than his earlier Kyrie, Sanctus and Agnus Dei (Op. 37).

Bruch had a lifelong devotion to folk music and became somewhat of an authority on German, Russian and Swedish music, some of which he drew upon in his Songs and Dances (Op. 63 and Op. 79). His "Adagio on Celtic Melodies" and better-known "Scottish" Fantasy (Op. 46) explore yet other sources, and his deep interest in folk art might well have influenced Vaughan Williams when that celebrated folklorist studied with him.

International in his travels as in his musical interests, Bruch was serving as conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic Society at the time he composed "Kol Nidrei." It received its first performance, however, at a concert of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra on October 20, 1881.

For the basis of his composition, Bruch quite literally drew upon what is regarded as one of the most sacred of Hebrew melodies, customarily chanted on the eve of the Day of Atonement. This prayer, the "Universal Jewish Encyclopedia" explains, serves to annul "all vows made in any form whatsoever during the course of the year, insofar as they concern one's own person."

The personalized solemnity of the original melody is most appropriately paralleled by the timbre of the solo cello, which intones it first, unadorned. Variations expand on the original theme and lead to a secondary subject, pronounced by the orchestra first, this time, and then assigned to the solo instrument. The original theme is recalled as the work concludes in a sombre mood.

TCHAIKOVSKY: VARIATIONS ON A ROCOCO THEME

Although Tchaikovsky's music rarely betrays the influence, he delighted in studying the scores of Mozart. Mozart was his idol of idols: "the greatest of all composers," even "the Christ among composers."

This taste, plus a general love for other eighteenth-century music of a rococo persuasion, explains the countless minuets and other pieces involving the century prior to his strewn through Tchaikovsky's catalog. Admittedly, he often "turned his ear backward" during those recurring periods when brooding seized him, and he felt "no desire to compose... disposed only to take on some easy, small-scaled work in relaxation."

At such times, he would usually settle upon a collection of folk or liturgical melodies, select a few and arrange them for chorus — or he would undertake an outright "hack" orchestration of some salon piece or other, popular at the moment. Occasionally, he would orchestrate pieces by earlier composers (like the four by Mozart which form his Orchestral Suite No. 4, subtitled "Mozartiana"). Finally, he would simply turn to composing in what he called "an antique style."

In spite of his avid taste for older music and basic good intentions, most of his music (arranged or original) dealing with older styles winds up being about three-parts Tchaikovsky and one-part source. A minuet never comes out quite sounding *really* like a minuet. But perhaps one should approach such Tchaikovsky concoctions much as one does a pleasing cocktail. Each component ingredient in itself has excellent, even self-sufficient properties. Together, the ingredients blend into something new and distinctive. As such, the raw materials are forgotten — and, usually, quite properly so. You might like your vermouth or your gin neat — but find a martini *also* palatable.

The Variations on a Rococo Theme for cello and orchestra derives from this persuasion. It has moments in it which seem to re-create eighteenth-century manner and mode in charming fashion. But from the very announcement of its theme — one beautifully fecund to development after the procedures of the variations form — we know that the romantic in expression will rule over the rococo. The theme itself sounds "antique" enough until, at the very end of its statement, we hear comments which could only have come from Tchaikovsky's pen. From there, we shift entertainingly between the shades of older ideas and the lights of newer expression — at least those new in Tchaikovsky's heyday. But, in end effect, there is no clash: the Rococo Variations, Tchaikovsky's finest composition for solo instrument and orchestra aside from the First Piano Concerto and the Violin Concerto, casts a very large illumination on the idea and ideals of what such a solo-concerted piece should be.

It would be difficult to better the brief, precise description of the Variations given by Edwin Evans in his biography of Tchaikovsky: "It is known to all cellists as one of the finest display pieces in existence, but it has greater qualities than that. Each variation has a charm and piquancy of its own and is accompanied by orchestration of that lucid, dainty type of which Tchaikovsky was such a master when it suited his purpose."

The formal shape is that of theme and seven variational sections (if one is fussy in analysis, one can add two cadenzas as separate sections). The writing for solo instrument is so deliciously "right" that the sound transmitted to the ear is somehow almost tasted on the tongue. As English musicologist Eric Blom has said: "The cello's abnormally, almost freakishly wide range is exploited here to the full with the greatest vivacity and brilliance."

Adapted from notes by
Paul Affelder and Edward Cole
("Rococo Variations")

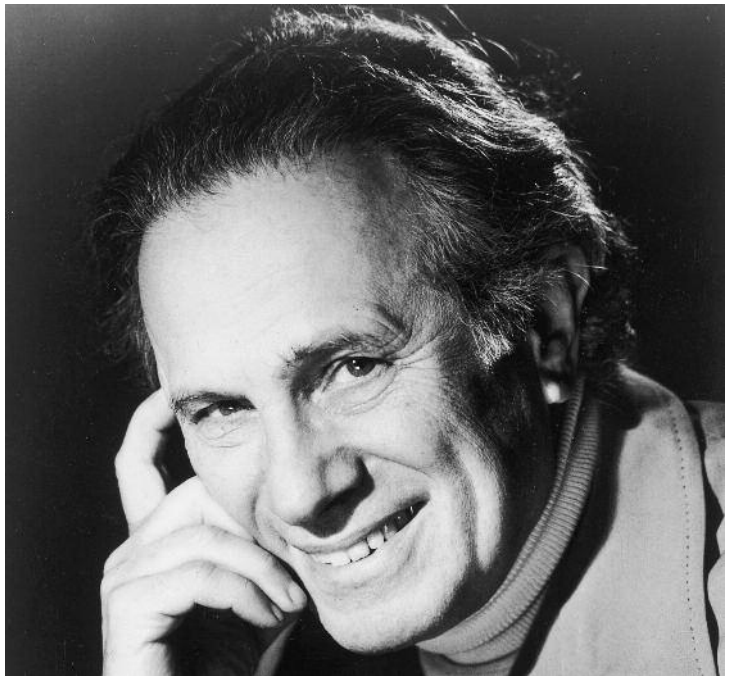
JANOS STARKER

"Every so often an artist appears who dominates his instrument in the minds of a generation, and usually you spot him young. There was never much doubt about Casals, or Heifetz, or Segovia, or Landowska. And there is not much doubt today about the 37-year-old Hungarian-American Janos Starker." Thus Martin Mayer in 1961 began a word-portrait of an artist who could even then review some 20 years of critical acclaim.

While occupying the first cello chair in several leading American orchestras, Mr. Starker built upon an already imposing international reputation that had begun in Hungary, where he was first cellist at the Budapest Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra. After coming to the United States in 1948, he made a deep impression on the musical life of this country, serving as principal cellist of the Dallas Symphony, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony and performing in solo recitals.

"It took no time at all for Mr. Starker to prove . . . that he is certainly the equal of any living cellist," remarked Harold Schonberg of "The New York Times" on the occasion of his first New York City recital in 1960. Since then, in addition to his activities as a performer, however, Janos Starker has devoted a considerable portion of his time to travelling among American community orchestras as string consultant and teaching at Indiana University as professor of music.

Perhaps the aspect of Janos Starker's art that has produced most comment is the exceptional subtlety of conception and refinement of control which he commands. Raymond Ericson of "The New York Times" summarized Starker's accomplishments in these words: "The technical aspects of Mr. Starker's playing are so wholly merged in the solution to problems of interpretation and style, that the listener tends to forget how much technical mastery the cellist has achieved. The pitch is unerringly right, the tone is mellow without being mushy, difficult leaps and runs are manipulated with the easy unobtrusiveness of a magician."



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